



## IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENT AND THE USE OF FOOD BANKS

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### ABSTRACT

Food insecurity is a serious issue which affects a broad population of people in a number of ways. Food insecurity is best defined by noted scholar Dr. Valerie Tarasuk 2003 “as the limited, inadequate, or insecure access of individuals and households to sufficient, safe, nutritious, and personally acceptable foods to meet their dietary requirements for a productive and healthy life” (pg. 1). A particularly susceptible population to poverty and food insecurity is the immigrant population composed of identifiable ethno-racial groups in society (Cook 2008). Being an immigrant Canadian, and a former food bank user myself, I will touch upon some of my own experiences throughout this paper. Further, I will share and incorporate all the personal reflections, experiences and analysis that I have garnered, being a social work student upon completion of a yearlong placement at a food bank as a community counsellor from (September 2008 – April 2009).

This paper will explore the challenges of the settlement experience and the difficulties that recent immigrants, specifically those who have immigrated in the last 10-15 years, have in accessing food banks. Upon conclusion, I will discuss and analyze some social policy initiatives that can alleviate the difficulties that immigrants have in assessing food banks. Coming from a social work background, I hope to incorporate social work concepts and theory into my analysis. I will emphasize the importance of effective cross-cultural social work practice in working with a rapidly increasing, culturally diverse Canadian population. Ultimately, I will present the anti-oppressive framework from social work theory as an instrument that can be used as an effective tool to resist the barriers that many Canadian immigrants encounter.

## Immigrant Settlement and the Use of Food Banks

The escalation of poverty has changed the provision of food aid<sup>1</sup> in our society. An example of this is the fluctuation in the use of food banks. A survey recently released June, 2009 by Food Banks Canada suggests that food bank use has increased by as much as 20% this past year alone, largely motivated by a weak economy and job losses (Signs of the Times 2009). Household food insecurity is becoming more of an issue, and has taken on increasing recognition as a “major public health problem in Canadian society” (Tarasuk 2005 pg. 1). Tarasuk articulates that “Food insecurity became recognized as a problem in Canada in the early 1980s when community groups began to establish charitable food assistance programs in response to concerns that people in their midst were going hungry” (pg. 1). These early programs came in the form of “food banks”, which has since become the primary response to the problem of food insecurity (Tarasuk 2005).

Public perception widely considers Canada an official multicultural and anti-racist society, containing one of the most welcoming and open immigration policies in the world (Omidvar & Richmond 2003). However, an especially susceptible population to poverty and food insecurity is the recent immigrant population as well as identifiable ethno-racial groups<sup>2</sup> in our society (Cook 2008).

A study done by Ornstein (2000), based on the 1996 Canadian census found that there is a large gap between Canadian European ethno-racial groups, and all other Canadian racial groups in terms of poverty rates. The family poverty rate<sup>3</sup> for Canadians from non-European racial groups was 34.3 percent, more than twice the rate of Canadians from European racial groups (Ornstein 2000). Non-European families account for 36.9 percent of families in Toronto, but 58.9 percent of all poor families were from these identifiable racial groups (Ornstein 2000). In the following sections I will explore the issue of immigrant settlement and the use of food banks; I will dispute the notion, that despite their lower economic statuses, immigrant Canadians are not overrepresented food bank users, and an economic drain on society, and that those whom do rely on food banks do so because of complex socioeconomic situations that are caused by a variety of multifaceted factors. I will provide a short background of myself, my social location, as well as the reason I chose to engage this particular subject. I will then discuss the importance of social policy initiatives regarding the issues that immigrant Canadians face. I will further offer an analysis of the importance of effective cross-cultural social work practice in working with a rapidly increasing, culturally diverse population. Finally, I will present the anti-oppressive approach from social work, and how it could be used as a tool to resist the barriers that immigrant Canadians face upon settlement.

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<sup>1</sup> Food aid is a source of assistance for people suffering from a shortage of food (World Food Programme, n.d). It is a short term response to immediate hunger and food insecurity. A common form of food aid provision is the use food banks. Most food banks in Toronto, such as the Fort York Food Bank aim to provide a three-day supply of groceries per visit, which seeks to meet Canada’s food guide.

<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of this paper will be defined as any population or group of people from identifiable ethnic racial groups.

<sup>3</sup> Percentage of families whom live below the Canadian poverty threshold, which was 14.5% based on the 1996 Canadian census (Canadian council on social development, n.d).

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## **My Background and Social Location**

My professional purpose in life is to find something of which boasts meaning to me. My professional goal emulates how I try to live my life, which is with passion, aspiration, purpose, meaning, and following what I believe in, all encapsulated together. The reason I am in social work is because I was young and idealistic enough to believe that one person can change the world, something I still believe in, albeit more realistically. I wanted to find a profession of which was self-rewarding, and at the same time I felt well suited in, as I feel I have so much to offer.

Having been through a tumultuous childhood growing up in China, and immigrating to Canada at the age of eight; I feel as if I have benefitted from seeing life at a perspective that many people may not have had the opportunity to experience. Shortly upon our arrival, I remember our first apartment; it was a small one bedroom basement complex. It was just the three of us. I remember being home alone all the time, as my parents worked sixteen hour days. I remember being the subject of ridicule and mockery at my first elementary school, with zero amount of Mandarin speaking children. I recall the difficulties my parents had in accessing social services, of navigating the “system”, and of finding culturally sensitive and appropriate services. The reason I have chosen to write about food banks and food insecurity is because the food bank was the first and only type of outside support my family has ever received. One of my earliest and most profound memories I have had during my early years was that of my mother taking me to a food bank every Saturday morning. She took me because they were inclined to give you more if they saw that you brought your young children there. It became something I looked forward to, that is finally having some child appropriate junk food and candy that my mother could not afford to buy for me.

This past year (September 2008 - April 2009), I have been doing a placement at Fort York Food Bank as a community counsellor. It is through this experience that I have been able to learn so much regarding the issue of food insecurity. During my time at this food bank, I have encountered and noticed an unexpectedly high amount of recently arrived immigrant service users. I feel I can relate to them, and I cannot help but be nostalgically reflective in seeing some of myself in them, as perhaps they, like me and my parents, are here seeking the promise of a better way of life. My hope is to one day through direct practice, research and social policy development contribute in the effort to improve the quality of life for all people, especially those whom are oppressed, in facilitating a more inclusive society.

### **The Immigrant Settlement Experience and the Use of Food Banks**

Canada has one of the highest proportions of immigrant residents to non-immigrant residents of any country in the world, especially in large cities, such as Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal (Omidvar & Richmond 2003). The Toronto CMA (Census Metropolitan Area)<sup>4</sup> is home to one twelfth of Canada’s population; however, it is the destination of choice for 43% of Canada’s recent immigrants (Lucia Preston Wang, Reil Harvey & Siu 2001). In proportion to its size, Toronto has three times as many immigrant Canadians compared to the rest of Canada, with an overwhelming larger share of recent arrivals (Lucia et al 2001). According to Omidvar & Richmond 2003, the geographic issue of immigrant settlement as well as its process has become topics of great concern in Canadian public policy, as Canada is experiencing increasing

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<sup>4</sup> “Area consisting of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a major urban core.” (Statistics Canada, 2007)

difficulties making use of the skills and attributes of Canadian newcomers. At the same time, its challenge is equally concerning for the immigrant and refugee communities, as they are “expressing a growing sense of frustration, even despair, at the barriers they encounter to full participation in all domains of Canadian life” (Omidvar & Richmond 2003 pg. 15). These recent immigrants face a particularly complex set of circumstances. As a group, it seems that they offer a unique and wide range of skills and attributes, in terms of their education as well as experience in their respect fields; however, they experience disparities between those attributes with the wages they earn, and their overall standards of living (Husband 1998). Furthermore, they often face a frustrating time trying to find employment in their respective fields and areas of study, despite their often comparable education, experience and credentials, due to barriers such as, difficulty obtaining accreditation in their respective fields in Canada (Husband, 1998). An example would be the inability to attend a post-secondary institution due to the high cost of tuition among other factors, or the lack of re-training and accreditation programs for various professions. Based on the above factors, it can be inferred that recent immigrants are notably disadvantaged. Research shows that newly arrived Canadian immigrants are more likely than their Canadian born counterparts to be receiving welfare, living with expenses their incomes cannot support, and losing out in the competitive employment market due to their lack of the “Canadian experience” (Husband, 1998 pg. 1). Furthermore, other non-economics factors should not be ignored. Recent immigrants face a multitude of barriers, such as a lack of support networks, perhaps due to not having a familiar network of family and friends. Cultural differences and a lack of literacy may also contribute to recent immigrants being unknowledgeable of and accessing social support services (Barriers to Access to Social Services n.d). A period of adjustment to a completely new culture can be tough for anyone, and perhaps a language barrier of which complicates everything. Furthermore from a social work perspective, the impact of discrimination, racism and prejudice on Canadian immigrants must also not be overlooked. These are all major factors that can compound the difficulties Canadian immigrants may face obtaining their needs (Michalsi 2003)

There are dangerous stigmas out there that recent Canadian immigrants are taking away “scarce jobs” from other Canadians; that they are an economic drain on the social safety net and they “refuse to ever integrate into Canadian society” (Husband 1998, pg. 1). A report done by Husband, (1998) diffuses those stigmas. The report is based upon Daily Bread Food Bank’s 1997 survey on users of emergency hamper room programs in the GTA area. The study showed that 54% of food bank recipients, which is just over half of all food bank users in Canada, were born in Canada. Of this, 30% were considered “established immigrants” whom have resided in Canada for at least five years, while only 16% of all food bank users were considered to be recent immigrants (5 years or less) (Husband 1998). These statistics show that 46% of the total percentage of food bank users were not Canadian born, that percentage is very close to the percentage of total immigrants that live in the GTA, which is 41%, based upon the 1996 census (Husband 1998). This means that by proportion, the immigrant population are not necessarily overrepresented food bank users. The study also demonstrates that compared to their Canadian born counterparts, recent immigrant food bank recipients have “by far the highest level of educational attainment” (pg. 1) however, this advantage in educational attainment does not translate to an advantage socio-economically. This large discrepancy between their educational attainment and income “suggests that their disadvantage is both relative and absolute.” (Husbands 1998 pg. 1) The study also suggests that the primary sources of support for immigrant families are community based and not state based, that they initially rely on family members, *Esurio*, personal savings, and sources of support within their respective ethno-racial

communities, not by being an economic drain on the Canadian government (Husband 1998). The main argument that the Husband, (1998) article makes is that “whether born in Canada, or not, people who turn to food banks are all food insecure.” (pg. 1) Food banks are not a substitute for social policy, and it is ultimately up to the government to “act to enhance the conditions of being Canadian” (Husband 1998 pg 1), which further supports the argument I make in this paper. This research by Husband, (1998) effectively supports the doctrine of this paper, by eradicating the idea that recent immigrants are nothing but an economic drain on society, but rather that their situations are due to a variety of complex institutional factors in the barriers that they face.

### **Social Policy Implications**

I completed a volunteer placement from (September 2008 – April 2009) at Fort York Food Bank.<sup>5</sup> Through my role as a community counsellor, I have learnt much about the issue of food insecurity, as well as gaining first hand insight into how a food bank operates and assists its service users. I can indisputably say that my time at Fort York Food Bank was an eye opening experience; it has rid me of the various preconceptions that I was naïve enough to have held regarding access to food and hunger, it has opened up my mind, it has enriched me with so many awe-inspiring life experiences, and it has given me a new found humbling perspective on life. Through my experiences at Fort York Food Bank, I was given the opportunity to hear and learn about the various underlying issues of which service users of food banks were experiencing. It was through this, that I got a better understanding of the complexity of issues that contributes to the growing concern of food insecurity. I must admit that it was an emotionally draining experience for a third year social work student going into my first practicum experience with the arrogant mindset as if somehow I was going to change the world, soon realizing that the food bank was more of a temporary response to an exposed problem, rather than as part of the solution to the underlying causes. I felt frustration by the work that I was doing, powerless even, in affecting real social change at a wider scale. The use of food banks is a symptom of a much larger problem, and its existence provides a limited response to the extensive problem of poverty and social inequality. It has become a vital facet of the fight against poverty and food insecurity, but at the same time acting as a smokescreen concealing resource inadequacy and the ultimate failure of social policy<sup>6</sup> and political will in realistically responding to deep-rooted problems in society (Payne 2005). The issue of food insecurity among the recent immigrant population has tremendous social policy implications. The growing prevalence of food banks, and the fact that food banks have become a staple in the fight against hunger, suggests that there is something wrong with the current “welfare state and public safety net” (Riches 2002 p. 650). Food banks fail to address the deeply rooted issues, and are an insufficient answer to food insecurity, “It fails to address people’s inability to acquire or consume an adequate or sufficient quantity of food in socially acceptable ways” (Riches 2002 p. 649), it is a bandage to patch up what has been hurting; duct tape mending what has been broken.

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<sup>5</sup> A non profit registered charity, originally founded as an independent agency of the Daily Bread Food Bank Foundation of Toronto. Visit [www.fyfb.com](http://www.fyfb.com) for more information.

<sup>6</sup> “Social policy can be broadly defined as decisions and resulting guidelines about the allocation of resources and rights in a society.” (Christensen 2003 pg. 70)

As previously stated, the recent immigrant population represents a particularly vulnerable population in Canada. Thus social policy initiatives must develop dynamic methods, strategies and enhancements to meet these new changing conditions. The findings above confirm the need for programs targeted specifically for ethno-cultural groups that experience persistent socioeconomic disadvantages (Yan & Wong 2005). The unfavourable outcome of employment opportunities for immigrant Canadians can be attributed to factors such as the “glass ceiling phenomenon”, a lack of local experience, difficulty obtaining accreditation, and the tendency and need to take any type of job, even unfavourable jobs, just to make ends meet (Lo & Wang, 1999). With this in mind, Lo & Wang (1999) suggests that (the Canadian government must consider) “implications on economic integration and social harmony, and expedite the policy processes on accreditation and labour market training, or simply rethink their immigrant recruitment strategies.” (pg. 1)

An array of other factors also affects the day to day lives of this population. Firstly, Omidvar & Richmond, (2003) posit that the lack of English language teaching services creates barriers in the functionality of newcomer youths in the areas of “education, employment, and general social adaptation” (pg. 6). Thus it is imperative that fiscal restraints not cut their levels of support for official language training programs, and continue to provide free or low-cost ESL classes designed for a wide range of native language speakers.

This research by Omidvar & Richmond (2003) also mentions the impact that the settlement process can have on parents, and how that can directly affect the lives of their children, as parents whom work longer hours in order to make ends meet, will subsequently have less time to partake upon activities with their children. Consequently, these children may be obligated to partake upon greater responsibilities around the house, in terms of added chores and household tasks (Kilbride et al 2000). Thus, accessible social programs that can provide child care and after school programs are vital.

Immigrant and refugee families must also have settlement services that are easily assessable for them when they first arrive, as well as “linguistically- and culturally-appropriate health and social services throughout their years of adaptation” (Omidvar & Richmond 2003 p. 7). One major problem with our current system as identified in the Omidvar & Richmond (2003) study is that the entire settlement support system is only geared towards the “initial stages of adaptation” (pg. 8), while it is clear that newcomers need support throughout the entire process, which can span up to over a decade (Omidvar & Richmond 2003). While initial support in the areas of “language training”, “integrating into the labour market” counselling and “referrals to health and social services” are important (Omidvar & Richmond 2003 pg. 8). Immigrant Canadians in the intermediate and final stages of their settlement journey may have different needs requiring different services, including, but not limited to, accessing “various Canadian systems” such as, municipal services, finding housing, legal and health assistance, and finally, long term adaptation to Canadian society (Omidvar & Richmond 2003 pg. 8). Thus, social policy initiatives in Canada should consider adopting a long-term perspective in response to the needs of the immigrant population as the state supports their full adaptation into Canadian society.

## The Importance of Effective Cross-Cultural Social Work

Recent research gives clear evidence that Ethno-racial minorities often have a very different experience of Canada than do Canadians from the dominant group<sup>7</sup> (Christensen 2003). This includes their understandings, perceptions and uses of various Canadian social agencies and programs. This fact was apparent to me through placement, in a food bank consisting of a large proportion of clients whom were recent immigrants, with a large proportion who spoke my native language of Mandarin. The food bank provides an interesting case study, as I noticed that the whole concept of free aid with no reciprocity appear foreign amongst recent immigrant service users. Some of the most common cross-cultural issues of interest that I have witnessed between recent immigrant service users and their use of food banks were that, many of them believed that these food banks were all government owned and funded, unaware of the fact that many are completely non-profit and independent of the government. For some clients expressed frustration and disappointment in the type and amount of food<sup>8</sup> they have received! Clients often convey to me their dissatisfaction with the lack of a more culturally friendly selection of food items, and feel that the availability of a disproportionate amount of traditional western food items, of which these immigrants are not used to eating, represents a form of social exclusion, and of the system ignoring the needs of ethno-racial communities. These cross-cultural issues of tension merely illustrate a few examples of cultural differences in understanding immigrants may have when accessing Canadian institutions, such as food banks. These cultural differences intersect with some the more overt cultural impediments such as language barriers, as obstacles that recent immigrants may face in accessing social services. Thus, I believe it is vital for social workers and other professionals whom work directly with them to respectfully and effectively explain and inform clients regarding the policies and procedures of their various organizations, towards eradicating possible misunderstandings that people may have of them. At the same time, it is imperative for them to be culturally sensitive in their work with an increasingly ethnically diverse population, to eradicate cultural misunderstandings in hopes of achieving a more inclusive provision of services.

With these issues established, I will provide a brief overview of the technique of cross-cultural social work, and how I believe it can help enhance social work practice with clients from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cross-Cultural Social work as defined by D.W. Sue et al (1982) is any working relationship “in which two or more of the participants differ in respect to cultural background, values and lifestyles” (D. W. Sue et al. 1982). Yan & Wong (2005) state that “with cultural diversity increasing in North America, cross-cultural practice has grown significantly in the social work profession” (Yan & Wong, 2005 p. 181). Cross-cultural social work is vital, because social workers bring their own unique cultural biases, beliefs and values into their working relationships with clients from different cultural backgrounds that may not share the same viewpoints (Green 1999; Lum 1999).

In working with the recent immigrant population, social workers and social service providers will encounter clients from a plethora of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Thus, when social workers first meet their clients, their initial perceptions of them come from

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<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this paper, the dominant group in Canada will be identified as Canadians with British and French ethnic backgrounds.

<sup>8</sup> Food programs such as the one at The Fort York Food Bank aim to provide clients with the equivalent of three days worth of groceries per visit, which is consistent with the Canadian Food Guide (Fyfb 2009).

various sources, one of them being based upon their own experiences and interpretations, which are derived and reflective upon their own cultures and beliefs (Yan & Wong 2005). And in order for social workers to eliminate any discrepancy that they may have with clients, whom may not share the same cultural background, beliefs or values as the worker, a high level of self-awareness must be maintained (Yan & Wong 2005). Self-awareness is a key instrument of cross-cultural social work; it is the capability to be knowledgeable of our own self, to recognize our own individual values, beliefs, thoughts and biases (Yan & Wong 2005). The ability to recognize our own cultural identities is imperative in controlling the “personal cultural influences” (pg. 183) we may exert on our clients (Yan & Wong 2005). Social work practitioners must critically examine their own cultural influences and that of the client’s as well, after all, an “appreciation of the client’s cultural background is widely accepted as the major variable of an effective cross-cultural working relationship” (Yan & Wong 2005 pg. 1). Maintaining a high level of self-awareness is imperative in working with the Canadian immigrant population.

### **Analysis from an Anti-Opressive Perspective of Social Work**

Being a social work student from a school which adopts an anti-oppressive framework,<sup>9</sup> I offer it here as a tool of resistance and change to the barriers that immigrant Canadians face. So, just what is anti-oppressive practice? Dominelli, (2002) defines it as “a form of social work practice, which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with clients”, (pg. 6) in the hopes of the creation of a more inclusive society. And as the name suggests, it believes that any and all forms of oppression can be harmful. It aims to provide “appropriate and sensitive services by responding to people’s needs regardless of their social status” (Dominelli 2002 pg. 6), which is needless to say, a vital perspective in working with any population. The immigrant population as mentioned above face a particular set of circumstances and disadvantages. They face structural inequalities in their access to education, employment and social services, which make them vulnerable to food insecurity. These social divisions and inequalities adhere to exactly what anti-oppressive practice hopes and aims to transform. Anti-oppressive practitioners aim to provide appropriate and sensitive responses to the needs of people regardless of their social status, and that is needless to say a vital tenet in working to alleviate poverty and food insecurity. The anti-oppressive framework also values equality, which is to value differences in people, in hopes of not creating an “othering” of people (Dominelli 2002). To not exclude, discriminate nor oppress individuals based upon their differences, variance, nor diversity. As these recent immigrant newcomers face an intersection of possible barriers and oppressions; such as those based upon their, race and ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic class, linguistic abilities, gender, and religion and etc, which can all contribute to their susceptibility to food insecurity. Anti-oppressive practice need not be limited to social work students nor social workers, it can be a way of life, and anyone and everyone can practice its principles. Thus it is the collective goal of anti-oppressive practitioners and all who believe in its core principles, to help alleviate and eliminate all forms of oppression, in hopes of the creation of a more inclusive society.

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<sup>9</sup> “Actively working to acknowledge and shift power towards inclusiveness, accessibility, equity and social justice.” (Involve Youth 2 n.d pg. 10)

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## **Conclusion**

Canada is an official multicultural country, and one of the most popular and welcoming countries for new immigrants, especially in urban metropolises such as Toronto. However, immigrants face a particularly challenging set of circumstances; they are a noticeably disadvantaged population in our society. The complexities of immigrant settlement have become a major social policy issue in Canada, and for good reasons. Due to the magnitude and the sheer size of this population, and the considerable disadvantages of which many face upon arrival in Canada cannot be ignored.

This paper explored the issue of immigrant settlement and the use of food banks, but disputed the common and unfounded notion that immigrant Canadian residents are overrepresented food bank users, and an economic drain on society, but rather that their situations are caused by a variety of multifaceted factors. Further, I discussed how social policy implications contribute to the existence of the disadvantages that immigrants possibly will face that may contribute to food insecurity; as well as social policy adoptions and amendments as possible responses to the issue. Cross-cultural social work is offered as an example of a necessary framework of which social workers should use when working with the immigrant population, while providing examples of various cultural impediments that clients may encounter in accessing social services in the context of a food bank. Finally, an anti-oppressive approach of social work was applied throughout my analysis as a tool that can help address the barriers that the immigrant population faces. The focus of my analysis is the anti-oppressive practice principle, of the elimination of all forms of oppressions, and the creation of a more inclusive society.

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